Overview: The Integrated Competency Model

Our Workforce Planning Model and Tools are based on an ***integrated competency-based human resources model.*** Although this phrase may sound intimidating – particularly to those who are not HR professionals – the concepts underlying the model are intuitive and straightforward. Nonetheless, it is important to have a basic understanding of what competencies are, how to integrate them into all of an agency's human resources programs, procedures and processes, and why it's important to do so.

This overview is designed to help you understand:

- What competencies are and why they are important.
- Why it is important to integrate the Competency Model throughout all of your HR systems.
- How the Competency Model can be used as the foundation for your gap-closing strategies.

What Are Competencies and Why Are They Important?

The term **competencies** is widely used in both public and private sector organizations and has become part of the everyday jargon in the professional practice of both Human Resources and Staff Training. However, the term is sometimes used in very different ways.

- HR practitioners usually give the term a behavioral focus. Examples of competencies in this context are characteristics such as *Communication* and *Analytical Thinking*. The underlying notion is that the successful employee will possess the behavioral attributes associated with superior performance.

- Training practitioners often give the term a task or functional focus. Examples of competencies in this context would be, "able to conduct a strength-based interview," or "able to complete a case assessment." The underlying notion is that the successful trainee will be able to perform the critical elements of the job.

The following Questions and Answers help clarify what competencies and how they fit into the overall Workforce Planning process.

What are competencies?

We define competencies *as the knowledge, skills, behaviors, personal attributes and other characteristics that are associated with or predictive of superior job performance*. Examples of competencies include *Decision Making*, *Influence*, *Stress Tolerance* and *Teamwork*.

Decision Making/Problem Solving
Breaks down problems into components and recognizes interrelationships; makes sound, well-informed, and objective decisions. Compares data, information, and input from a variety of sources to draw conclusions; takes action that is consistent with available facts, constraints, and probable consequences.

Influence
Uses appropriate interpersonal skills and techniques to gain acceptance for ideas or solutions. Uses influencing strategies to gain genuine agreements; Seeks to persuade rather than force solutions or impose decisions or regulations.

Stress Tolerance
Maintains effective performance under pressure; handling stress in a manner that is acceptable to others and to the organization.

Teamwork (non-supervisory competency: supervisors use Team Leadership)
Participates as an active and contributing member of a team to achieve team goals. Works cooperatively with other team members, involves others, shares information as appropriate, and shares credit for team accomplishments.

Research suggests that when supervisors describe the best employee they ever supervised, they seldom focus on that person's technical knowledge and skills, or their academic credentials and work history. They tend to describe behavioral characteristics – or competencies – such as being a team player, focusing on customer/client needs, and having great organizational skills. Similarly, employees tend to describe their best supervisors as those who build trust, give immediate feedback, and show concern for them as a person.

The ability to pinpoint the characteristics that differentiate the average worker from the exemplary worker is fundamental to a competency-based system.

Isn't having the right educational background and experience really important?

Having specific technical knowledge, education and experience is important, but it is not what usually distinguishes between average and superior performance. Having the right academic training and technical skills are often the threshold requirements for the job, serving as minimum credentials to make it through the screening process.

However, those with the strongest technical skills – and even prior experience – are not necessarily the best performers. For example, an employee with the greatest knowledge of social work principles and the most years of experience will not be among the best workers unless they are also able to make good decisions, be a productive contributor to the team, and form constructive relationships with their clients.

How do competencies tie into our gap-closing strategies?

The competencies you identify as being critical to successful performance in your targeted classification/s will serve as the foundation for your gap-closing strategies. You will use these competencies when you design your gap-closing strategies for all your HR processes, including employee selection, performance management and professional development.

For example, if you determine that *Communication* is a critical competency that your Child Welfare Caseworkers need to improve (a competency gap), you can:

- **Employee Selection**: Select new workers who are skilled in *Communication* by developing interview questions that will help you learn whether applicants possess this skill.
- **Performance Management**: Target *Communication* in caseworkers' performance management plans and identify actionable guideposts related to it in order to track improvement.
- **Professional Development**: Identify specific training and development resources related to *Communication* in caseworkers' performance management plans.

Are the same competencies needed by all employees, irrespective of the kind of jobs they hold?

The specific competencies that are critical to successful performance in one type of job or job family may be quite different from those in another. *Influence*, *Initiative* and *Follow Up* are competencies often associated with success in sales jobs, while *Stress Tolerance*, *Decision Making* and *Planning and Organizing* may be more predictive of success in social work jobs.

The specific competencies associated with superior performance within a particular occupation may also differ from one organizational culture to another. Not surprisingly, the organization's mission, vision and values will very likely determine the definition of successful job performance. Organizations wishing to make a significant change in their strategic direction, goals and objectives will be more successful if they clearly articulate the competencies for the key jobs that are critical to making these changes.

How many competencies should be identified for a given job classification?

A large number of competencies may be desirable in any given classification. However, it is important to avoid identifying too many competencies for a particular job. You should narrow your list for a given job classification to the eight to twelve competencies that distinguish the best performers from the rest. Using more competencies than this makes them meaningless – supervisors cannot provide appropriate feedback and employees cannot effectively focus on improving in too many areas at one time.

Does the application of competencies to HRM systems and processes have any research or scientific basis?

The study of competencies began in the early 1970's, resulting in hundreds of job studies over the years focused on identifying what differentiates strong performers from average performers.[1] The underlying premise is that having a better understanding of these differentiators will allow organizations to hire better employees, and to better evaluate and develop them.

Integrating the Competency Model throughout your HRM System

To be most effective, your organization should integrate the same competencies identified for a specific classification throughout all aspects of the HR program, including recruitment and selection, performance management, and professional development.

For example, once you've identified the competencies most critical to job performance in your targeted classification, you should design the selection process to recruit and hire people who possess those competencies. Once hired, employees should be given performance feedback on how well they demonstrate those competencies, and their professional development plans should focus on further improvement in the critical competency areas.

The figure below illustrates how a classification's competencies are integrated into an organization's entire Human Resources Management system. In this example, *Organizational Ability* is the critical competency, and the classification is Child Welfare Caseworker.

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[1] Zwell, Michael. 2000. *Creating a Culture of Competence*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Integrated Competency Model
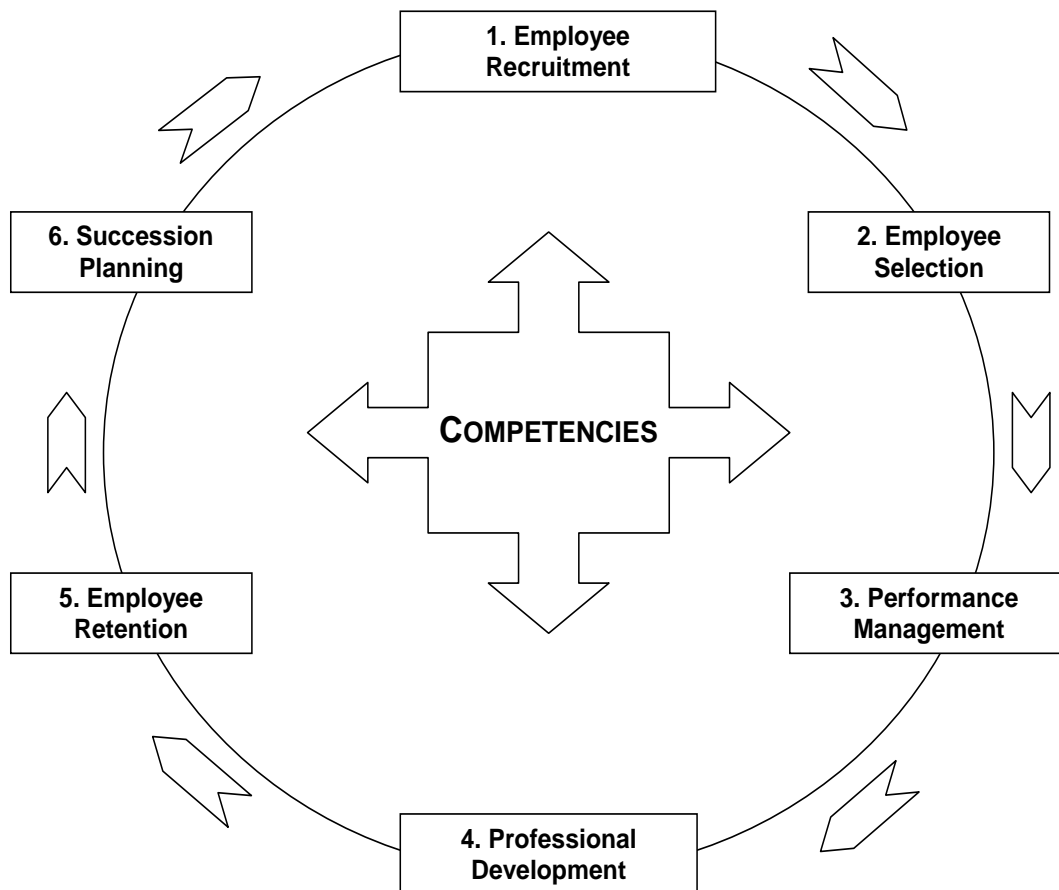
In implementing your Competency Model, consistency is critical. To use one set of competencies for the selection process and another for performance management invites confusion and dilutes the effectiveness of the Competency Model.

In addition, your Competency Model will be most effective when everyone in your targeted classification understands which competencies the agency considers critical to successful job performance. When consistently used, the language of the Competency Model will become interwoven into the fabric of the organization, and integrated into employee performance.

In the table below, we grouped the HR processes into three major phases:

- Recruitment and Selection
- Performance Management
- Professional Development

The table below illustrates an example of a Competency Model for a Child Welfare Caseworker. It identifies the twelve competencies that are critical to successful performance in the job. The table shows during which HR phase you would focus on each competency. In other words, during the Performance Management phase, it's critical to assess Caseworkers on:

- *Collaboration*
- *Communication*
- *Cultural Competence*
- *Planning and Organizing*
- *Teamwork*

Competency Focus for HR Processes – Child Welfare Caseworker

Competencies for Child Welfare Caseworkers	Recruitment and Selection(1)	Performance Management	Professional Development
Adaptability	x	Optional	Optional
Building Trust	x	Optional	Optional
Collaboration	x	Required	Required
Communication	Writing sample and overall interview	Required	Optional
Continuous Learning and Professional Development	x	Optional	Optional
Cultural Competence	x	Required	Required
Customer/Client Focus		Optional	Optional
Decision Making/Problem Solving	x	Optional	Optional
Planning and Organizing		Required	Optional
Stress Tolerance	x	Optional	Optional
Teamwork		Required	Optional
Technical/Professional Knowledge and Skill	Resume clarification and overall interview	Optional	Optional
(1) Behavioral interview questions will be asked in the seven competency areas denoted with an "x". The *Communication* competency will be scored based on answers to the other questions and on the scoring of the written exercise administered by the agency. The *Technical/Professional Knowledge and Skills* competency will be scored based on answers to the other behavioral questions, the applicant's education and experience, and answers to direct questions asked about experience.			

Although the twelve competencies listed are important for all employees in the classification, it isn't practical for the organization to focus on all of the competencies at the same time, nor is it practical for every employee to focus on all of the competencies at the same time.

In some organizations it is most practical to introduce the Competency Model into all of the agency's HR systems simultaneously. In others, it will be better to phase the Competency Model into HR systems on a gradual basis. Although there are real benefits to introducing a fully integrated system all at once, unless your organization has the capacity to do it well, it is better to phase it in gradually.

When phasing in the Competency Model, we find it best to introduce it into the selection process first. Typically there is less resistance to changing a selection process than a performance management process because it directly affects fewer employees. Most agencies will also find it best to introduce the Competency Model into the performance management process at the beginning of a performance evaluation cycle. We don't recommend waiting longer than a performance management cycle to introduce the Competency Model into this process. This will

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prevent you from selecting employees under one set of competencies and evaluating them under another.

Integrating a Competency Model throughout your Organization

Your integrated competency-based HR model should be used throughout the organization. Doing so simplifies the administration of HR services and increases everyone's perception of the importance of the competency-based approach. Integrating the model throughout the organization has a number of advantages:

> ➢ Tip:
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> Before introducing a competency-based system into your HR processes, begin with the end in mind. Think through what you want to accomplish, the overall implementation strategy, and how the Competency Model will be introduced into other HR systems in the future. Beginning with the end in mind will help make the transition to a fully integrated Competency Model much smoother.

- To focus the Competency Model only on one or two classifications will diminish the potential success that can be achieved by introducing the integrated Competency Model throughout the agency.
- All employees understand which competencies they need for the successful performance of their current jobs, and also for higher-level jobs to which they might aspire.
- You can use a Competency Model as an important tool for shaping an organizational culture around the competencies needed for the agency's overall success. For example, if you've determined that *Customer Service* is a competency that is central to your agency's success, by integrating the competency throughout your agency's HR processes, the organizational culture will change to reflect the importance of *Customer Service*.